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# Review.

## THE DANTE AND BEATRICE OF ARY SCHEFFER.

To criticise Dante were like fathoming the deep ocean. Yet some adventurous plummets have gone down, and here and there found bottom in its lesser depths; so may one now and then, find in the profound and mysterious dream, Dante, some points jutting up more nearly into the region of ordinary human feeling, like a mighty mountain chain climbing from Oceanic depth, and indicating the structure of that lower world. To understand him, one must be like him, and have suffered like him, must have wandered, exiled not only from his Florence, but from that fairer bower of rest and content which each human soul builds in itself, or wanting which, one will lie down in vain for repose under the vine arbors of Earth's fairest land. Yet in the immeasurable sadness and sorrow of the Divina Commedia, the influence of Beatrice is like that under-ocean chain of mountains coming into human sight and reach, and now and then breaking the depths with a sunny island, amid whose poetic flowers and shades human fancies may flit and sing. Dante's love for Beatrice is comprehensible by any human mind *pure enough* to love like Dante.

And this love is the central idea of the Divina Commedia. Through the terrors and gloom of the Inferno, his blood curdling and his soul fainting from the unutterable woe around—through the sickness of heart from hope deferred of the Purgatorio—into the calm and peace of the Paradiso, Virgil may have guided him, but Beatrice drew him.

"With half-drooped lids, and smooth, round brow,  
And eye remote, that only sees  
Fair Beatrice's spirit wandering now  
In some sea-lulled Hesperides.  
Thou movest through the jarring street,  
Secluded from the noise of feet  
By her gift blossom in thy hand,  
Thy branch of palm from Holy Land;—

In fact, he lived a divided life, his Intelligence on earth—his Will in heaven; and his wanderings in this world, were but the reflection of those of his heart, exiled and seeking peace in the imagining of that heaven for which it longed. It can, indeed, scarcely be wondered at, that scholastics, with souls petrified into lifeless intellectual criticisms, should have regarded Beatrice as a myth—an impersonation of Philosophy, for the problem of her influence on her poet is one too deep for mere intellectual solution—the heart must feel it ere the brain can compass it. But this is true, that had not Beatrice lived, the great poem had not been written. It is at once the noblest tribute to human love, and the highest testimony of human immortality, which inspired man has ever offered. Strip the Divina Commedia of its episodes, and it stands as simple Dante and Beatrice. What Dante was we know—in intellect, one of the mightiest—in heart, one of the noblest and purest—and in life one of the most honored by men, of all the men of past time—one of those whom few ages beget, but all ages claim. Of Beatrice we know scarcely anything—no circumstance essential to a knowledge of her character. And

yet one thing, and this to the last degree important—*Dante loved her*. It is almost everything. We know then that she is the half of that poem, that she was pure and deep-souled, of rare spiritual beauty, and of a lofty mind, capable of receiving and responding to the poet's noblest thoughts. Had she been any less than this, had she failed in any one of these respects, she could not have held Dante as she did in that life-long, blessed, bondage. The lesser cause cannot produce the greater effect, and we know thereby that the measure of Dante was that of his heavenly mistress.

According, therefore, to each man's estimate of the great Tuscan must be his ideal of Beatrice, and when we pass judgment on an artist's treatment of this theme, we must first see what are his probable powers of appreciation of Dante. Is he a man of that heavenly frame of mind which could enter with Dante into Paradise, or walk unscathed with him through the fires of Hell? Is his human tenderness such that he could weep with him, and that his feet should bleed with the exile's on his rugged road? Is his religion such that he could, with Dante, be faithful through tribulation, and be only rendered sadder and more heavenly through his misfortunes? If there is any faith in the indications of men's works, we believe that in all these respects Scheffer would be found the worthy illustrator of the Divina Commedia. His Sciote women, and the picture from the story of Francesca da Rimini, prove the depth of his pathos—his Christus Consolator, and Dead Christ, are evidence of his spiritual tenderness, and the Temptation, of his spiritual elevation. He belongs to one class of true religious artists, and in all that concerns the better part of the soul—the moral attributes, he is fit to walk by the side of Dante.

But Dante, again, was a poet of the most wonderful and intense imagination. Here Scheffer must leave him: Scheffer is philosophic, religious, pathetic,—all that is earnest and elevated; and as an idealist, the first by far since Raphael, but not imaginative like Dante, and here his estimate of him must, in some sort, or manner, fail, and his consequent ideal of Beatrice must also lack something of that which, with due deference be it spoken, it seems to us Beatrice represents. Scheffer's picture represents her with exceeding spiritual beauty and purity, but deficient in that personal force of character which she must have had who held in bondage this "scarred veteran of a life long war"—who could control through the lapse of years his heart's desires and impulses—who, in his married life, his prosperity or his adversity, amid all changes and chances, claimed and held his adoration, and for whose communion his heart sickened till death. There is, moreover, one incident which is known of her life, that she made a jest of him as he stood by the church door when she passed in to her wedding. This Scheffer's Beatrice could never have done: she is too gentle, too loving, to wound any human heart even to save her own from bleeding. She lacks, mingled with all her tenderness, an intellectual sparkle and vivacity—a piquancy which the imaginative and gentle Dante would demand to complete his enchantment. If he had been merely a strong, grave, intellectual man, he might have

given his fullest devotion to Scheffer's Beatrice, and have found in her love a relief from the weary action of his brain, but then he could not have loved as he did, through the years of silence and death, but would have found less poetic consolation in a new flame. But Dante had too much of the woman in himself—too much gentleness and patient devotion not to demand a stronger quality in her whom he should love to eternity, and this is hinted at in her girlish scorn of her gentle suitor.

Yet Scheffer's picture is not only exquisite in the conception of his Beatrice, but it is consistent with itself in the corresponding character of Dante. In this picture, he is a grave, intellectual man, Dante clearly enough, but lacking the womanliness and tender passion expressed in the mouth of Giotto's portrait of him. But if that were Dante, then the other might well be Beatrice, and the picture is thus one of the most remarkable instances of philosophical development of the ideal that we know of, and, as we observed in reviewing the Temptation, that the fact that Scheffer's was not the universal ideal of Christ, did not affect its value as a work of Art, so the "Dante and Beatrice" is equally as perfect in itself as if it agreed with our ideal, and *we were right*. Judged in itself, it is a lovely creation. The severe and simple lines of the draperies, and the unstudied dignity of the posés, are exceedingly impressive, though at first sight they make the picture seem quaint. Scheffer is always spoken of as no draftsman, but we do not know the professed *dessinateur* in France who would render so perfectly the refinement and subtle grace of the hands of Beatrice, or give more fully the expression of the whole figure; and the noblest drawing, it seems to us, is not that which displays most skill and knowledge, but that which conveys the highest refinement of truth, as it is expressive of the motive of the figure.

This picture, like the most of Scheffer's, grows over its faults on study. Goupil & Co. have published an admirable line engraving of it, which no lover of high Art should fail to possess.

THE Louvre, already the largest museum in the world, is perpetually receiving fresh accessions of wealth. The Count de Nieuwerkerke, director of the imperial museums, has purchased at Laon (Aisne) a cross of an altar of the twelfth century, of which the sisters of St. Vincent de Paul were the possessors. The sum given for it was 5,000 francs, and this *chef-d'œuvre* will be placed in the Louvre.—*Athenæum*.

THE bending trunk, waving to and fro in the wind above the waterfall is beautiful, because it is happy, though it is perfectly useless to us. The same trunk, hewn down and thrown across the stream, has lost its beauty. It serves as a bridge—it has become useful; it lives not for itself, and its beauty is gone, or what it retains is purely typical, dependent on its lines and colors, not its functions. Saw it into planks, and though now adapted to become permanently useful, its whole beauty is lost for ever, or to be regained only in part when decay and ruin shall have withdrawn it again from use, and left it to receive from the hand of Nature the velvet moss and varied lichen, which may again suggest ideas of inherent happiness, and tint its mouldering sides with hues of life.—*Ruskin*.